

Cohen and Reines on "Two Concepts of Shabbat"

PHILIP COHEN:

Reines's Assumptions and Claims

In a *Journal* article entitled "Two Concepts of Shabbat" (Fall 1987), Alvin Reines argues in favor of a notion of Shabbat which he terms "State-of-Being Shabbat" over the normative Shabbat, which he terms "Seventh-Day Shabbat." Because this conceptual shift is paradigmatic of an extremism in one version of liberal Jewish religious philosophy, it is important to analyze the assumptions underlying Reines's argument, in order to examine closely what we are being presented. In order to accomplish this, a brief exegesis of the article is necessary prior to the actual analysis.

Reines first claims that the meaning of Shabbat as traditionally understood has been lost to the community of what he terms "modernist" Jews, i.e., Jews who reject the divine origin of the Bible and who oppose religious supernaturalism (p. 3). Shabbat, he says, is out of harmony with the modernist's environment. That is, since our contemporary environment is different from that in which Shabbat was conceived, that renders the concept of a time-rooted Shabbat "*inefficacious*," impotent, and "arrythmic" (p. 16, Reines's emphasis). Reines utilizes an organic metaphor to describe the evolution of religious observance: "Over the course of time, the religious observance in interrelationship with changes in its existential context will emerge, grow potent, turn inefficacious, and finally, become impotent" (p. 16). Shabbat, too, has undergone this process of growth and decay.

Reines claims that the conditions under which Shabbat was in harmony with the Jewish mind have ceased to exist, and now the utility of Shabbat has all but vanished.

The Shabbat that permeated the entire culture of the medieval Jewish community was based on the belief that God is the creator of the world and author of the Torah. Shabbat succeeded as a holy day because it allowed everyone in that community to desist from labor; it functioned effectively because medieval Jews lived in

relatively closed, theocratic communities that were capable of promulgating and enforcing religious law.

By contrast, modern Jews live in a society in which religion is voluntary and religious observances unenforceable. Contemporary social conditions are such that neither work nor cultural life pauses for the Jewish Shabbat, and thus the “modernist” Jew finds it difficult to set aside the traditional time for its celebration and still function in the modern world. This social conflict is undergirded by the crucial fact that, in the main, the “modernist” community is characterized intellectually by a critical mind-set which denudes the Bible of its previously assumed divinity.

The traditional Shabbat, Reines says, has two broad characteristics. The first consists of the beliefs and rituals normally included in Shabbat celebration — i.e., prayer, abstention from work, acknowledging the holiness of Shabbat, the celebration of Shabbat as a commemoration of God’s creation of the world, and so on. The second characteristic consists of the final effect of the traditional celebration, what Reines calls *soteria*, which he defines as “an experience [or “consciousness” (p. 16)] of ultimate meaningful existence” (p. 25). It is this formulation of the effect as a “profound sense of perfect security” (p. 16) which Reines feels is capable of bridging the religio-intellectual chasm between the Middle Ages and modernity, thereby preserving a Shabbat of a sort, one that is in harmony with contemporary social and intellectual conditions. The center of this Shabbat, as with the traditional Shabbat, is *soteria*, but now instead of seeking it out of the context of a divinely revealed Law, we seek it autonomously, independent of revelation, and hence independent of specific time constraints, whenever and wherever it can be experienced.

It is clear that Reines’s analysis is born of a deeply felt humanitarianism and a strong sense of Jewishness (as he understands the term) united into one attempt to recapture Shabbat for disaffected “modernist” Jews. He posits this new view of Shabbat so that Shabbat may be preserved rather than further abandoned by a Jewish community alienated from the traditional beliefs and rituals associated with Shabbat. His reconstruction of Shabbat is, as he explains, an avenue of religious expression for those whose philosophy of religion precludes participation in the world view of rabbinic Judaism in any sense of the term.

***Soteria* as the Essence of Shabbat**

My major objection to Reines’s theory centers on his theory of *soteria* as the essence of Shabbat, rabbinic or “modernist,” on the ambiguity of the term, and on the assumption that it can be iso-

lated from other constitutive aspects of Shabbat, i.e., that it can exist independently and yet retain some clear definitional relationship with the entity from which it has been separated. I will argue that by separating Shabbat radically from its historical context, and thereby dissembling the form and content underlying the term, we are left with a word empty of sufficient meaning for us to understand it. Thus deprived of adequate philological content, we are unable to make any kind of Jewish sense of Reines's extended use of the term.

As we have seen, the traditional Shabbat emerges out of a world view that holds to a belief in the createdness of the world by the direct agency of God who (and here I go further than does Reines in the article) made a permanently binding covenant with the Jewish people. The upholding of this covenant, as we all know, consists, on the part of the Jews, of obeying the laws of the Torah (as rabbinically interpreted), not the least among them being the laws of Shabbat. How this affects the world or the future of the individual adherent is less than unanimously agreed upon by medieval-rabbinic Judaism, but in some way obedience to the Law increases the chances of favorable governance by the Lawmaker, the usual term for *governance* in religious language being, of course, providence.

The term *providence* here is key. For the medieval (and contemporary Orthodox) Jew, *soteria*, ultimate meaningful reality, is more than some undifferentiated experience. Rather, it has a direct source: the belief in the covenant and in the providence that living within the covenant entails. The belief in providence is rooted in sophisticated religious metaphysics, cosmology, and teleology that grant to God the major and proximate role in the creation and governance of the world in which humans — and, from a Jewish perspective, specifically Jews — have a set of responsibilities. Within that structure, the Jew functions out of an epistemology that makes specific knowledge claims about the operation of the world and the role of the individual Jew. The *soteria* of the traditional Shabbat observer, that sense of existential well-being, is tied, I should think inextricably, to the belief structure to which he or she subscribes. (Incidentally, I do not see how *soteria* can be confined specifically to Shabbat; it is a phenomenon that covers the entirety of religious practice and experience. Thus Reines's discussion of Shabbat must be a model for a larger application.)

It is thus difficult to understand how one can separate the cause from the effect, the belief structure of rabbinic Judaism from the consequences of living within that structure, and legitimately argue that what one has left, *soteria* without rabbinic Judaism, is nevertheless integrally related, in a comprehensible linguistic

manner, to the structure from which it has been analytically extracted. Yet this is precisely what Reines does in laying the groundwork for his reconstruction of Shabbat. Contemporary instances of *soteria* may be interesting, but it is difficult to see how they bear any analytical relationship to the *soteria* of the traditional Shabbat observer, since the “modernist” seeking to experience *soteria* does so, by Reines’s prescription, in radical divorce from the original concept.

It is possible that Reines’s definition of *soteria* may provide some assistance for our understanding his theory. We will recall that he defines *soteria* as “an experience [or “consciousness”] of ultimate meaningful existence,” through which one experiences a “profound sense of perfect security.” As we have seen, this definition of the term has some comprehensible meaning when applied to the traditional Jew: *Soteria* is an experience related to the traditional Jewish belief structure of revelation and covenant. Within that metaphysical structure, the observance of Shabbat is associated with a large enough number of rituals to provide the Shabbat observer with a gateway to the experience of ultimate meaningful existence.

But what is it in the “modernist” context that can grant us that feeling of “ultimate meaningful existence” and “a profound sense of perfect security”? We are told essentially that the “modernist” Jew rejects the assumptions of rabbinic Judaism *in toto*. We learn that the scientific conditions of the modern age militate against both the view of Yahweh as Creator and the Bible as literal Divine revelation. With the loss of these beliefs comes a concomitant loss of commandedness and, it goes without saying, the end of the traditional covenant. Thus we are given a negative analysis of the situation: We know what the modern mind is not; we do not know what it is. We know that the claims of modern criticism are granted absolute veto power over the claims of traditional religion. We are not, however, given even the seeds of an alternate religious structure within which the phrase “ultimate meaningful existence” makes any sense, nor is there any satisfactory explanation that justifies calling what we are given “Shabbat.” Cut loose from time and place, belief structure and ritual, Shabbat becomes a synonym for *soteria*. Since *soteria* has no discernible meaning, neither does Reines’s reconstructed Shabbat.

What we have then is a radical critique of traditional religion with no positive description of “modernist” religion. All we know for certain is that the belief structures that inform the theory of *soteria* for the two versions of Judaism share no metaphysical claims, and, moreover, we are unclear as to the metaphysical claims of the new concept. But assuming Reines were clearer in

his exposition, the two concepts share the *possibility* that each view allows its adherents the experience of "ultimate meaningful existence." But however similar the emotional responses of the individuals in those two contexts might be (assuming for the moment that such responses could be measured), *soteria* is grounded differently in each case. What is "ultimate" for one is necessarily so different for the other that there can be no possible logical correspondence between the two uses of the term. It is thus enormously difficult, if not logically impossible, to see what relationship exists between the so-called State-of-Being Shabbat and the Seventh-Day Shabbat. If, as it appears, they share no relationship, then it is similarly impossible to understand how Reines's Shabbat bears any linguistic similarity (and here I use "linguistic" in as broad a sense as possible) to Shabbat as we know it. Put simply, Reines's *soteria* is not only incomprehensible, but, worse, it is impossible to see how the State-of-Being Shabbat in its total rejection of Jewish epistemology can be conceived as a Jewish concept.

Reines's Methodology

I would like to turn now to a discussion of Reines's methodology. His argument begins with a description of the social and intellectual structure of the Jewish community (i.e., that "modernist" Jews do not accept the traditional Shabbat) and seeks to explain how practices succeed or fail based on how people are thinking and behaving in a given social context (i.e., the decay of Shabbat). The way in which he frames his premises gives the argument the patina of social law.

At this point Reines makes the prescriptive statement based on his sociological "discovery" with which we are occupied in this article. The traditional Shabbat is considered without regard to the possibility that its existence can be understood as being linked to a covenant which could be said to have a claim on us as Jews. In other words, the contemporary social condition is assumed to reflect both what is and what ought to be the case. Put differently, the divinity of Torah is rejected *a priori*. Shabbat is then revised so that it may fit the new context. What Reines apparently does not wish to do is offer a critique of the philosophy of contemporary Western, secular society. He is unequivocal in his assertion that we must alter the structure of Judaism to fit our current situation. There is no hint whatsoever in the article that perhaps society, or at least the Jewish sub-set of Western society, ought to conform to the demands of Shabbat, and not *vice versa*. This is not the place to enter into a lengthy discussion of this

point. Suffice it to say that the ease with which Reines blames Judaism for its failure to satisfy Jews' needs is palpably arguable. His willingness to revise and re-frame one of the central elements of Jewish life, with the effect of loosing it from any substantive Jewish mooring (unless one is willing to argue — and I am not — that the utterance of a Jew is immediately shot through with Jewish content), is a disservice both to Judaism and to contemporary Jews. On the one hand he cavalierly abandons the Jewish sources as obsolete, while on the other he offers a purportedly Jewish religious framework, a framework, which, in actuality, is not Jewish at all.

Surely, until Reines, *all* liberal Jewish thinkers sought means through which the language of the Jewish tradition bore some strong relationship to their own religious language. Their reinterpreted versions of Judaism — whatever their strengths and weaknesses — were grounded, in part at least, in the sources of Judaism. What Reines does, it appears to me, is re-conceive Judaism out of his radical critique of Judaism, without serious regard for the sources of Judaism, and then call what he gives us “Judaism” on the grounds that he can impute whatever meaning he chooses to terms without regard for their etymological history. He pragmatically allows, without ethical or linguistic strictures, that whatever an individual calls Judaism, or does in the name of Judaism, is *ipso facto* acceptably Jewish as long as it works.

The connection of liberal Judaism with the rabbinic tradition (where “rabbinic tradition” is understood broadly) is often tenuous at best. Yet it is this connection that grants us our Jewish legitimacy, that allows us to define our Jewish terminology, if you will, in such a way that the definitions have some perceivable relationship to their linguistic ancestors. We cannot step totally outside of that tradition and expect to find Judaism easily. The claim that a term has no relationship to its past usage, that we can sunder an etymology and merely retain the term of emotional reasons, is, as we have seen, erroneous. What a Jew says, even in the name of Judaism, is not necessarily Jewish. It needs to be connected to that larger whole which lies in the past and which keeps us connected with our past.

PHILIP COHEN is principal of the Worcester Community Hebrew High School in Worcester, Massachusetts; Rabbi of Temple Beth Shalom in Melrose, Massachusetts; and a doctoral candidate at Brandeis University.

ALVIN J. REINES:

In his critique of my article, "Two Concepts of Shabbat," Philip Cohen has raised a number of thoughtful questions not only with respect to the State-of-Being Shabbat, but to my philosophy of Reform Judaism generally. My responses below are integrated into a systematic presentation. I must, however, preface this presentation with two qualifications. First, the arguments for a number of my points are too lengthy to be included in this summary statement. Accordingly, where necessary I refer the reader for a fuller discussion to my book, *Polydoxy: Explorations in a Philosophy of Liberal Religion*.¹ Second, I have responded only to those remarks of Philip Cohen that I consider philosophically substantive. I have not dealt with statements that appear to me as only subjective emotive evaluations. Neither have I responded to subtle, and I am sure unintended, misstatements in his summary of my article; but I do suggest the reader refer back to the article itself.

1. When the religious history of the Jews over the millennia (included in the term *Jews* are Hebrews and Israelites) is analyzed critically, it is evident that there is no such religion as "Judaism." There are rather a number of different, individual Jewish religions or religious systems.² Thus, for example, Pentateuchal Judaism, Amosian Judaism, Rabbinic Judaism (Talmudic, Rabbinic and Orthodox Judaism constitute essentially the same religion), Maimonidean Judaism, and Reform Judaism are all different religions. Hence, the terms *Judaism* and *Jewish* are empty of meaning when used without designating which particular Jewish religion is intended. I consider Cohen's fundamental objections to the State-of-Being Shabbat meaningless precisely because they are based on the fallacious notion that there is one Jewish religion, "Judaism."

2. The essential function and *raison d'être* of a religion is to offer its adherents a soterial process, that is, a regimen of beliefs, values, and observances whereby they can attain and experience *soteria*. Therefore, a religious system cannot serve as a religion for a person to whom it does not provide a soterial process. Thus, a Jewish religion is obsolete and irrelevant to Jews for whom it is not an instrument of *soteria*.

3. What is *soteria*? Owing to the finite nature of the human existence, which entails psychic and physical vulnerability all through life and leads inexorably to death, humans experience angst — which for the sake of brevity will here refer to all negative moods such as anxiety, depression, and the like. Angst annihilates the meaningfulness of human existence. *Soteria* is the state attained by a human when the problem of finity is resolved, angst

is no longer experienced, and existence has become intrinsically meaningful; that is to say, just *to be* is supremely valuable in itself. Hence my definition of *soteria* as “ultimate meaningful existence.”³ *Soteria* is intended as a general term referring to whatever is the supremely positive psychic state according to different religious and philosophic systems. Hence, to illustrate, *soteria* can be employed to refer to “salvation” in Rabbinic Judaism; Maimonides’ “fourth stage of perfection” or “the intellectual worship of God”; Spinoza’s “beatitude”; Buber’s “real living” that arises in the I-Thou relation; the “authentic existence” of existentialists, and the eudaemonia of Aristotle. Briefly stated: in religious and philosophic systems that understand human finity to produce angst that annihilates the meaningfulness of human existence, and which offer a process to overcome or eliminate angst, the state of ultimate meaningful existence that ensues in successfully pursuing this process is referred to as *soteria*.

4. As stated earlier, the religious history of the Jews is a history of different Jewish religions. The central force energizing the process whereby new Jewish religions are created is the name “Jew” functioning as an ontal symbol.⁴ As a new Jewish religion, the religion possesses authentically the name “Judaism” — in combination with a modifier that designates the particular Judaism that it is. Primarily, the reason Jews create new Jewish religions is that the existing Jewish religion is unable to provide them with an efficacious soterial process.

5. Do Jews have a right to reject an existing Jewish religion (with its beliefs, values, and observances) and create new Jewish religions (with new beliefs, values, and observances)? My answer to this question is a decided “yes.” We cannot in this brief discussion enter into a philosophic justification for this position. I will limit myself to stating unequivocally that every Reform Jew must say “yes” to the right of Jews to create new Jewish religions. For create a new Jewish religion is precisely what the founders of Reform Judaism did. Reform Judaism repudiated the most fundamental of the dogmas of both Pentateuchal Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism by denying for the first time in the history of Jewish religions that the Pentateuch (Torah) is an inerrant or verbal revelation. No religion can be the same religion as Pentateuchal Judaism or Rabbinic Judaism and reject the belief in infallible revelation that is their primary constituent and makes them the religions they are.⁵

6. There are numerous phenomena that have been called “revelation”; only one is of relevance here — verbal revelation. Verbal revelation is a verbatim communication from a theistic God that is inerrantly received by the prophet and inerrantly

delivered by the prophet to others, in writing or orally. If a religious community does not possess a verbal revelation, it has no knowledge of commandments from a creator God. For without a verbal revelation there is no way to know what a theistic God has commanded or whether he has commanded anything at all. The fundamental record and evidence for Jews of an ostensible verbal revelation is the Pentateuch. If the Pentateuch is fallible, erroneous in whole or in part, the validity of the Pentateuch as a record of and evidence for a verbal revelation is destroyed. (If one attempts to say the Pentateuch is only erroneous in part, there is no objective or convincing way to show why only one part and not another.) Reform does declare the Pentateuch is fallible. Accordingly, the Reform community as a whole possesses no *mitzvot* from a theistic God.⁶ This is not to deny that individual Reform Jews can and do claim they have received or presently receive commandments from a theistic God, but inasmuch as they can produce no objective evidence to support their claims, there is no reason for other Jews to believe them. From the denial of the infallibility of the Pentateuch emerges still another critical conclusion. Since the Pentateuch is the primary source of evidence for the belief that a covenant exists between a theistic deity and the Jews, once the Pentateuch's information is declared unreliable, no credible evidence exists for the notion that a covenant exists between Jews and a theistic God, let alone that there is knowledge of the *mitzvot* that constitute the terms of the covenant. Without credible evidence, I am compelled to conclude that belief in a covenant that was made by a theistic God with a Jewish community is unfounded and, as such, untrue.⁷

7. Since the various Jewish religions are discrete, independent systems, the beliefs, values, and observances of one need have no relation to any others. If I understand Cohen correctly, he is of the opinion that I am attempting to justify or legitimize the State-of-Being Shabbat as an observance for Jews by relating it somehow to the Seventh-Day Shabbat. If such is his inference, it is incorrect. Adherents of a particular Jewish religion have a commitment only to its principles; they have no obligation to any other Jewish religious system. If the concept of the State-of-Being Shabbat is consistent with Reform principles, and serves as an instrument of *soteria* for fellow Jews who, like myself, find that the Seventh-Day Shabbat is impotent, that is all I intended. What I meant to do by showing an existential relation between the Seventh-Day Shabbat and the State-of-Being Shabbat was to acknowledge my debt to the former. For it was by taking the Seventh-Day Shabbat seriously and analyzing it carefully that the seeds of the concept of Shabbat as a state of being came to me.

Epilogue

Cohen asked me three specific questions, which I answer below:

1. *Have I misread you, or is it that you lend no credence whatsoever to Jewish sources as serious guides for Jewish life?*

I do not know what you mean by the phrase “serious guides.” I think of Jewish sources of the past as providing a storehouse of information on the problems, possibilities, and ways of achieving *soteria*. Particularly helpful to me have been Amos, Ecclesiastes, and Maimonides. It must be borne in mind, however, that for the autonomous Reform Jew the ultimate guide and authority is himself/herself.

2. *Do you have a theory of revelation that would lead to a doctrine of Jewish existence, including, above all, an ethical theory?*

For the Reform community as a whole, there exists no verbal revelation, as explained above. Therefore, no theory of revelation exists in Reform that provides a doctrine of Jewish existence or an authoritarian ethical theory. Such a revelation, however, is unnecessary. The only justification for existence a Jewish religion requires is that it provides its adherents with a soterial process that is efficacious in their lives.

3. *Given my objections to the use of your theory of soteria, can you explain more clearly what logically unites the traditional Shabbat with your reconstructed version, and, in general, what the content of soteria is?*

There is no logical relation between the traditional Shabbat and my concept of State-of-Being Shabbat, and none is needed. The State-of-Being Shabbat is a new concept created for the modernist Jewish community in general and the Reform Jewish community in particular. Thus the State-of-Being Shabbat is not a “reconstructed” version of the Seventh-Day Shabbat.

NOTES

¹ Prometheus Books (Buffalo, New York, 1987).

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 99ff.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 63ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 166f.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 95ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 18ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 120f.

ALVIN J. REINES is Professor of Jewish Philosophy at HUC-JIR in Cincinnati.